

Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, June 29, 2008

Trinity Church

Matthew 10:40-42

One blizzardy Sunday this year the winter conditions made impromptu adjustments necessary and I gave an impromptu sermon. I can't remember what the Gospel text for the day was, but it invited a thought about recognizing the Christ that is in each other. As an example I told of something that had happened to me years ago. The Benedictine monastery at Richardton, North Dakota was hosting a conference that I was taking part in. It was a conference about something entirely secular. But the Benedictine monks were gracious hosts, and learning that I was Presbyterian minister, they invited me to join them in the evening office of Compline. As we made our way into the chapel chancel, walking two-by-two, I noticed that as the monks approached the altar, they made two reverences. First they revered the Christ present in the Sanctuary and then, each pair turned to each other and revered the Christ that is in the other person.

Incidentally, that is exactly what we do at each Communion service, when we greet each other with a sign of peace. It may be a pleasant exchange of greetings, but more deeply it is an act of reverence for the Christ that is in each of us.

Recognizing the Christ that is present in other people, valuing them as we would value Christ, loving them as we would love Christ: That was the theme of the gospel for that wintry Sunday morning. So far, so good; but later on, thinking about what I had said, a stunning thought struck me. So much in the gospels is about love our for our neighbors, recognizing their humanity and Christ's presence -- God's presence -- in them, that I had missed an important implication of what I had said. When we recognize that Christ is present in our neighbor, what we receive in return is the active reflection of the Christ that is **in our selves**. There is the Gospel message.

That is the Good News for today: "Jesus said, 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.'" There is Christ in you. There is Christ in me -- invited or uninvited, recognized or unrecognized, welcomed or not. What a stunning idea!

On deeper reflection, the idea is soul-disturbing, it is awesome. If we are to represent Christ, if Christ is to live in us, it calls for a profound and most probably painful probing of our values, the things that motivate and reward us, and the behaviors that emerge from them. We would hope to be perfect and inevitably we are forced to the understanding that we are not. What makes my conscious self a dwelling fit for the Christ that is in me? The doorbell rings and I am not ready! Embarrassing stuff is in plain sight.

There are, of course, those who live under the illusion that they can achieve a kind of moral perfection. That all they need to do is adopt a set of rules and follow them strictly. You can get all of the loose ends neatly tied up. It still means that there is a lot that has to be kicked under the sofa and jammed behind the spiritual closet door. The mask must never be allowed to slip. To think that everything is under control is to be trapped in the tight little circle of the self.

The gospel does not excuse our failures. It accepts them as the condition of our humanity and it rescues us from the "Catch 22" of struggling to be something we know that we can never be. Instead, it invites us to grow up. That's the real meaning of that terrifying word "perfect." It isn't really a terrifying word. It's a terrifying English translation of the one the New Testament writers use in their original language. Their word does not mean "flawless." It's really a verb.

Its meaning is “to move towards a maturity of character -- to grow up, however young or old we may be -- to grow up in the likeness of the Christ that is within us, the Christ we display to those around us and those that we meet along our way.

I can't remember a time more than the present when that mutual, two-way expression of understanding and compassion among people has been more necessary and at the same time harder to come by. The reasons are basically economic. There is nothing unusual in that. Human motives and human anxieties have always been rooted in their basic needs for food and shelter. But people are anxious. They are fearful. I don't need to run down the laundry list of reasons. It begins with the price of motor fuels, the life-blood of our complex culture; and the cause-and-effect process winds up, among other things, with unprecedented demands on local food-shelves. Selfishness trumps human sympathy.

One of this year's supposed-to-be “blockbuster” movies is *Sex in the City*. I haven't seen it and don't intend to, but I did read a long review. Apparently, the movie is mainly about shoes and handbags and closets. Woven into that is a parody of human relationships in the modern urban culture. Samantha, in the process of dumping one lover in favor of another, says to the loser, “I love you, but I love me more.” Evidently, that is something we were expected to approve; and, tragically, many do. Selfish interest trumps compassion.

One of the major casualties of economic anxiety in many cases is marriage and family, either in their actual shipwreck or as it degrades into a mutual isolation. There is no human relationship in which the mutual, reciprocal understanding, sympathy and forbearance are essential -- the Christ-to-each other -- and in no relationship they more devastating when absent or more rewarding when they are the rule. It takes some times of spiritual reflection to recover the understanding that your partner gets tired, too; and is also pressed by cares for many things.

Yesterday, the folk of Trinity Church helped to celebrate a long marriage between two remarkable people. There could never have been a better example of that mirror-imaged expression of Christ to each other, through all of the tests and hurdles that any shared life presents. And no better example of the blessing it confers, especially in the quality and character of a beautiful family: God present in the common processes of life.

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” How can that be? How can we ever admit Christ into the inmost chambers of our disordered minds and confused hearts? How can we be fit for God to dwell in us? The answer is that God accepts us as we are, but even more God sees what we can be, wherever we may be along life's pilgrimage.

That is grace, and maybe that is one reason we worship --to respond to God's grace. We praise God, not to celebrate our own faith, but to celebrate the faith God has in us. To let us look at God and let God look back at us. And when that happens, we will walk confidently in his glorious light. This is the Gospel of the Lord.

